

East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization. Mwenda Ntarangwi. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 2009. 158 pp. ISBN: 978-0-252-07653-4 pb; 978-0-252-03457-2 hb.

East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization examines the role of hip hop music in providing youth in East Africa a platform to articulate their concerns and to publicly engage in discussions concerning African identity and globalization, socio-economic policies and national politics, gendered identities and international inequalities as well as HIV/AIDS and sexuality, among other issues. Ntarangwi argues that in societies where power or voice on society's important matters is often assumed by elders (especially male elders), political leaders and rich people, hip hop music provides a way through which youth enter into the public space with some degree of voice, power and agency. The effectiveness of young hip hop musicians' voices is reinforced by a wide dissemination of hip hop music through radio, television, internet, video cassettes and CDs.

Ntarangwi also argues that the power that hip hop bestows on these young musicians is partly a result of the transnational nature of hip hop, making it impossible for authorities and institutions confined within a single national-state to control it. As he writes:

My argument is that East African hip hop and processes that lead to its production, consumption, and circulation is for the most part predicted upon a global consciousness that uses expressive culture not only as a politicoeconomic space for youth but also as one that is uncontrollable by institutions and powers that otherwise structure social discourse and identity within the confines of the nation-state (17).

It should be noted that the issue of addressing "tough social and political realities" has become a defining feature of East African hip hop. Like other scholars of popular music in East Africa such as Pieter Remes (1999), Alex Perullo (2005), Koen Stroeken (2005), Maria Suriano (2007) and Uta Reuster-Jahn (2008), Ntarangwi shows that young hip hop musicians compose songs on issues that are considered important in their societies so as to claim relevance of their music in these societies and refute widely spread stereotypes that associate hip hop music with hooliganism, laziness and vagrancy (xi, 119). In order to legitimize hip hop music and construct a positive image of it, most of hip hop musicians compose lyrics which engage with daily "struggles of youth and other marginalized groups" and articulate everyday realities and problems of the underclass (ix).

The book discusses how young hip hop musicians in East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) participate in negotiating and enacting their African identity through the lyrics and performances of hip hop music. They do this by resisting negative images about Africa and Africans constructed by colonialism and neocolonialism, images that enchain Africans with what these musicians describe as "mental slavery" (38) or "cultural inferiority" (54). The musicians take part in the production of positive images on which African identity is constructed. These new images aim at inculcating a

sense of pride and self esteem among Africans for being Africans. Like other musicians in East Africa, hip hop musicians construct an African identity not only through the use of African traditional music elements, dress, languages, or other material things but also through conferring positive “values and attitudes towards those material things” (43). Therefore, the process of localization, or “vernacularization”, to use Appadurai’s concept as Ntarangwi does (17), in hip hop is not only a material process also a mental process.

Concerning the issue of gender, Ntarangwi argues that hip hop musicians participate in the construction and reconfiguration of gender norms and ideas about femininity and masculinity. On the one hand, some hip hop musicians (both women and men) are shown to challenge and subvert prevailing gender stereotypes and norms. They also present alternative gendered identities and norms. On the other hand, other musicians (or even the same musicians at other times) embrace traditional gendered stereotypes and norms. They portray these stereotypes and norms as natural, essential and eternal or unchanging. Ntarangwi supports his arguments with convincing analyses of selected songs by Wahu (Kenya), Zay B (Tanzania), Jose Chameleone (Uganda), Bobi Wine (Uganda) and Lady Jay Dee (Tanzania).

In Chapter Five titled “Morality, Health, and the Politics of Sexuality in an Era of HIV/AIDS”, Ntarangwi examines the involvement of hip hop musicians in the fight against HIV/AIDS, in breaking the culture of silence concerning issues of sex and sexuality, and in the promotion of safe sex in East Africa in spite of hostile responses these musicians sometimes receive from their audiences. He also analyzes hip hop songs that challenge the stigmatization and discrimination of people who live with HIV/AIDS. Throughout the chapter, Ntarangwi’s analysis reveals a complex interconnection between the representation of HIV/AIDS in hip hop music and societal gender norms, morality, religious beliefs and politico-economic conditions.

The title of this book, *East African Hip Hop*, is somehow problematic and hence requires comment. Ntarangwi uses the term hip hop to refer “to the popular music in East Africa that emerged, in different phases and forms, at the end of the 1980s and broke ranks with erstwhile traditional or local styles associated with regions or ethnic groups such as *benga*, *muziki wa dansi* or *cavacha*”. In this sense, hip hop “combines elements of local, popular musical traditions with mostly American (U.S.) and Jamaican music styles of rap and raga respectively” (viii). However, the localization of these foreign music styles has taken different trajectories in the three East African countries under scrutiny. Ntarangwi notes that a new style of hip hop commonly referred to as *bongo flava* emerged in Tanzania (25). The term *bongo flava* is derived from two Kiswahili words: “*Bongo*, a Kiswahili word for brains” (used to refer to Dar es Salaam city), and “*flava*, a localized version of the English word flavor”. Hence, the term *bongo flava* denotes “the need for one to use his/her brains to survive in the city, especially in the post-socialist era engulfed in private enterprise and individualism” (129). To be sure, *bongo flava* is performed in many other styles apart from hip hop. These styles include zouk, R&B, reggae, takeu, bongo bangra and salsa or charanga, to name a few (Suriano 2007: 207). In practice, the lines that separate these music styles

from hip hop in Tanzania are not only narrow but also fluid and permeable. Even those *bongo flava* artists who will hardly accept being labeled hip hop musicians sometimes do incorporate hip hop style in their music. In some cases, hip hop sections in their songs are performed by *bongo flava* musicians themselves. At other times, the hip hop sections in their songs are performed by featuring invited hip hop musicians. This is especially the case with Lady Jay Dee, one of the famous female *bongo flava* musicians in Tanzania whose music is mostly derived from R&B and blends with other Tanzanian local music styles such as *muziki wa dansi*. Sometimes she performs in collaboration with hip hop musicians who add hip hop sections in her music. In these cases, we may understand why Ntarangwi considers Lady Jay Dee's music as hip hop, although Lady Jay Dee's music is not often considered so. My point is that although the concept of *bongo flava*, as used in Tanzania, is broader than that of hip hop; nonetheless, a contextual qualification – which is lacking in Ntarangwi's book – would clarify his use of hip hop as a generic concept.

Generally speaking, this book is a significant contribution to the study of contemporary music in East Africa. It is an important addition to the rapidly growing literature on hip hop culture in relation to African identity and youth agency, globalization and politico-economic changes as well as gender and sexuality in East Africa. Ntarangwi's writing style, which includes refreshing ethnographic reflexive accounts, analyses of song lyrics and theoretical explications, is interesting. In addition, Ntarangwi provides a useful appendix which gives brief information about selected hip hop artists discussed in this book and an informative glossary which describes six local popular music genres in East Africa mentioned in various parts of the book: *benga*, *bongo flava*, *cavacha*, *genge*, *kadomo kamu* and *kapuka*.

Imani Sanga, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

References

Perullo, Alex

2005 "Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania", *Africa Today* 51 (4):75–101.

Remes, Pieter

1999 "Global Popular Musics and Changing Awareness of Urban Tanzanian Youth", *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 31:1 - 26

Reuster-Jahn, Uta

2008 "Bongo Flava and Electoral Campaigns 2005 in Tanzania", *Stichproben: Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikanstudien* 14 (8): 41 - 69.

Stroeken, Koen

2005 "Immunizing Strategies: Hip-Hop and Critique in Tanzania", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 75 (4): 488 - 509.

Suriano, Maria

2007 " 'Mimi Kioo cha Jamii': Urban Youth Culture and Protest through Bongo Fleva and Hip Hop", *Swahili Forum* 14: 207 - 223.